DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 040 CS 210 146

AUTHOR Hua, Li Min
TITLE Can Anyone Thunder? Writing within the Bounds of One's Authority.
PUB DATE [85]
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Analysis; Authors; Documentation; Higher Education; *Persuasive Discourse; *Plagiarism; Reader Text Relationship; *Research Papers (Students); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Authority; Author Reader Relationship; Author Text Relationship; Chinese University of Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

In written compositions, authority derives from the dynamic interchange among author, text, and reader. English majors at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, after competing rigorously for their place in the university, adhere to received opinions rather than writing originally or authoritatively. From their very first assignment, the students are expected to write authoritatively, but the competitive culture of their secondary education has made their feelings taboo. They are then taught to increase their authority by gathering fresh evidence for research based papers. The students have special problems when they try to write authoritatively about literature because their writing lacks the voice of a real person speaking from experience. Students must be allowed to write badly, yet originally and creatively, before they can be expected to write well and authoritatively. For their senior theses, the students could write an original piece of literary analysis, but some made no attempt to distinguish between their own authority and that of their sources. As a result, they were taught about plagiarism and the difference between borrowing from sources to reinforce their authority and borrowing to usurp the authority of others. (SRT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED276040

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.
"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Li Min Hua
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Can Anyone Thunder?

Writing Within the Bounds of One's Authority

by Li Min Hua

"The writer wrote with authority."

This praise would please many writers, but how does one earn it?

Author derived from auctor, L., 'originator,' which in turn derived from augere, L., 'to increase,' 'to produce.' Author emphasizes the internal process. Writer derived from the Indo-European base wer-, 'to tear off' or 'to scratch' and emphasizes mainly the physical process. One might argue that authors faithful to the etymology of their vocation, do not merely scratch out some words but originate, create, and increase.

Matthew's gospel made a similar claim for Jesus following the Sermon on the Mount: "And his teaching made a deep impression on the people because he taught them with authority, and not like their own scribes" (Matthew 7:28-29). Jesus spoke, "You have heard...but I say." The scribes also discussed the law and the prophets, but did not dare to say "but I say." They would say, "Most commentators agree..." or "The consensus seems to be that..." or "The weight of opinion is..." or "a poll of experts shows...." The editors of the Jerusalem Bible footnote this passage: "These [scribes] always sought support for their teaching in the 'tradition' of the ancients" (27). Jesus did not.

Frequently I urge students to stake out their authority by being original, as in the following marginalia:

> Wu Ding Long, you make me want to see the film, about which I have already heard several comments. I do wish that you would add

CS210146

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

a more personal touch, a specialized insight from your own experience, to add your own "author"ity to the piece.

Huo Li, you explain the myth; but your paper reads too much like an encyclopedia, without much of your own "author"ity here. Enrich the paper with your own insights.

Tseng Lin, your narrative seems canned, as if out of a travel brochure, --prefabricated and not distinguished from several dozen others about the same subject. To compete for a discriminating reader's respect, you will always need a specialized angle, a way of seeing that vouches for your own personal authority.

While some readers prefer to assign authority primarily to "scribes," to those who subordinate individual perspectives to collective ones, I openly prefer the originators, as I specified in my outline to a course in Beijing:

> This course should rigorously challenge both you and me. We should enjoy it too. Do not try to agree with me or with anyone else, but find the sources of your own authority. When you are ignorant, seek more information. Value the knowledge that you bring here, but also seek to expand it.

When I a Westerner urge my Chinese students towards originality, I self-consciously exercise a strong cultural bias, the same bias I exercise when as an Alabaman I urge Wisconsinites towards originality--a bias arguably more from my academic culture than my geographical one.

Chinese academics led the world in invention for several thousand years, and the 1965-1975 Cultural Revolution vividly demonstrated how much tyrants and bureaucrats still fear the rival authority implicit in originality.

Authority derives from a dynamic interchange of the author, the text, and finally rests with the reader or readers. Stanley Fish speaks of "the authority of interpretive communities," each with its criteria for "author"izing. J. R. Searle charts many of the contextual constraints which affect the authority of discourse. The members of the D.A.R. understood the communial dynamics of authority when F.D.R. addressed them in his Hyde-Park accent as "Fellow Immigrants!" Today he would increase his authority if he emended to "Sister Immigrants!" Clearly we should not ask "Does this text have authority?" so much as "For whom does this text have authority?" and "Why?" and "Should it have?"

Many readers apply only limited textual criteria when they assign authority to texts, especially when the publisher is The White House, the return address is Harvard, or the author is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I. Hashimoto knows that he cannot revoke Dr. King's moral authority with the public even when Hashimoto points out that Dr. King in his speech "I have a Dream"

> is persuading unfairly--calling on his audience as "friends" when he knows only a few, building on emotional appeals created by allusions to famous men, the Bible, and Constitution. We can suggest that "all men are created equal" sounds nice but carries only emotive force. (48)

While several literary analysts focus on questions of canon, most composition researchers discuss authority less directly. For example, neither the table of contents nor the index of any of the first 20 current texts which I chose at random from my office, names the subject; yet all stress related concepts, such as the need of writers to find their own voice and the need for writers to analyze their audience.

Perhaps we can serve students better if we name authority as what's at stake in the analysis and thus encourage them to negotiate authority more self-consciously. Many students do not see authority as an issue until we teach them to do so.

We should not, however, expect to chart fixed boundaries for authority, as if a few simple rules can always identify when a writer would lose authority with any or all audiences. Writers themselves should not expect to identify the boundaries, as athletes might expect recognize when a routine overtaxes. Nor do teachers agree to any uniform criteria for attributing authority to a text.

For example, some teachers want a student first to use the discipline's jargon well before they accept the student's authority to speak about any fresh perspectives. Other teachers prefer that a student digest the professional concepts and direct them in a fresh way to an intelligent but general audience outside the discipline. Should the English major target the readers of Saturday Review or for PMLA? Should the psychology major pitch for Psychology Today or The American Journal of Psychology?

We will not likely get a consensus, nor should we, if want to

train our students for the varied criteria which they will face as writers. The May 1985 issue of College Composition and Communication explores "Writing in the Academic and Professional Disciplines" and highlights many conflicting criteria. See especially the problems which Barbara C. Mallonee and John R. Breihan report in "Responding to Students' Drafts: Interdisciplinary Consensus," (213-231).

More of us in all disciplines need to monitor and report how students establish or undermine their authority with us.

One Teacher's Experience

Authority surfaces often crucially for the English majors whom I teach at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Competing to master a rigid British syllabus, each new student has eliminated 29 other candidates for her or his university place. Each arrives rigorously adhering to received opinions. Our Writing Program attempts to wean them, to free them for their own authoring. We hope that they can write originally and competently--authoritatively--about language or literature by the end of the second year.

For their first paper students must "describe three ways to redeem each of four stale or tedious subjects by bringing to it a fresh angle--e.g., How to Boil an Egg." For their second paper students write about "a book which [they] hated." The competitive culture of their secondary education made their feelings taboo. No one has ever asked them to criticize an assignment or to explore their personal experience about a book. These assignments terrify many. They do not know the new ground rules.

Soon we stress that writers can increase their authority by gathering fresh evidence. Sometimes we import techniques from the social sciences, as we did recently. We asked the students to read Clifford Geertz's "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding." A recent Yale graduate in anthropology who tutors in the program then lectured on how to gather fresh evidence about one's own culture. We assigned a paper thus:

> Gather some original, specific, and candid ethnographic evidence about your own culture. When you report your findings, balance "the most local of details" with the "global structures" or "symbol systems" (Geertz's phrases) which you allege these details to serve.

I suggested eight tacks, but urged the students to carve out a topic of their own.

Not surprisingly, ninety-two percent opted for one of my eight suggestions. Thereby they threw away a good chance to increase their authority, their own originality. They have to share with me a huge portion of any "credit" for their "success" with a project which I had substantially "produced."

Others undermined their authority by treating their data casually. Some merely stapled the data to a brief summary, without attempting to compose it as a vital part of the paper, as if to say "I've done my research and have concluded thus. If you don't believe me, you wade through the evidence as I have done." Those accustomed to hear others pontificate might readily identify authority as inherent in conclusions, not in the specific evidence. On one paper I wrote:

I miss in your paper any attempt to show off your own cleverness, your skills at gathering evidence to prove a point. You trouble me when you speak as if you possess vast authority on all matters related to the topic, but then never you use your fresh evidence to establish the authority most likely to persuade thoughtful readers.

On another paper I wrote:

As an editorial, your paper engages. As research, it offends.

Never do you cite any hard facts (closely controlled descriptions; quantified behavior, etc.), much less describe your methodology. Here you ascribe qualities to all Chinese males and females and offer your own voice as your only authority! I would not believe most trained professionals were they to speak so broadly. Most would not speak so broadly; most would stay within the scope of their special research.

Even your own experience could carry you further. Why, for example, do women outnumber men in your own class of new English majors? Why do families today no longer bind little girls' feet? ..... You ignore the multiple standards by which this society classifies females and males.

Still, more than some of your competitors, you seem to sense what's at stake in many parts of your subject; rarely are you frivolous. I push you here because I want you to probe for deeper insights, not for superficial ones.

Another student wrote about Chinese grief, but only from personal memory. Since the student remembered many customs in specific detail, the paper had authority as an account of one person's experience; but it lacked the kind of global perspectives we demanded in the assignment. As a field worker, I would welcome the student as an informant, but only as one of many. I suggested a new vision of the assignment:

> Instead of talking off the top of your head--as interesting as cream sometimes is--why not go for higher stakes, even as you stay with some of the specific customs which you mentioned:
>
> 1. Ask 25 people off the street: "Do you believe we should still not wash our hair for 49 days after our parent dies?"
> 2. Ask 20 people to describe false grief that they have observed and to tell you what clues led them to believe it false.
> 3. Ask 5 Chinese Americans, 5 Hong Kong Chinese, and 5 PRC Chinese to name 5 or more Chinese customs about death which their parents told them about but did not/do not practice. Do not tell any person that you will interview anyone else. Analyze all correlations which you discover.
>
> In any one of these projects you could have systematically gathered fresh evidence about matters which you raised much more casually. You assume that you have authority merely because you have a pen and paper. Instead, you must establish your authority.
>
> Don't just correct the surface matters in this paper; write out the designs for 3 more projects (not mine, but three of your

own) that could establish your ability to talk about death in a Chinese setting more cogently, more authoritatively.

Another student undermined her authority by getting no critical distance from the custom which she reported, namely the Hong Kong practice of maintaining separate washrooms for teachers and students at all educational levels. She explained the expensive practice as a response to "a gap between teachers and students." The student insisted that such "physical differentiation between students and teachers is universal." The student never backed off to see that several cultures do not provide separate washrooms, and that most other colonial cultures do.... I will not withhold authority until the student adopts my own different interpretation: but she can increase her authority with me if she reviews the customs more provocatively, more "globally."

Authority in Literary Papers

Students have special problems when they try to write authoritatively about literature. Some view all analysis as an attempt to rehash canonical information and never establish any authority for their own text. Others try to state their own insights but flounder in inauthentic diction. They lack what Donald Hall calls "one of the most important features of good writing," namely "the voice of a real person speaking out of his own experience, using his own language, with a minimum of tired phrases, of borrowed clothing" (10).

When my students wrote recently about a book which they had

understood and also hated, I responded to one paper:

> Lu, I like your attempt to lead into your discussion of a specific story by stressing what's at stake. In Paragraph 1, you attempt some strong statements about reactions to literature, but many of your words miss their target. You use vocabulary over your head, you make the same point sometimes 3 times, as if to practice with a thesaurus. You muddle your insights with trite and inexact diction. Thereby, you divert my attention from the experience which you define. Your views seem artificial and inauthentic. When your words don't belong to you, when they don't fit yet, you give up your authority to talk about even your most genuine experiences. (Ironically, someone who controls words well can often win authority to talk about experiences not genuinely her own.)

Presumably the student used the big words intentionally, to try to impress me, to try to sound like an authentic English major. Master teacher Mina Shaughnessy observes:

> Most writers can remember in their own writing histories a period of self-conscious emulation of the formal style, heavy with long words and stiff with the set expressions and elaborations of that style. Were writers to wait to use such words and phrases until they could manage them perfectly, they would not learn to use them at all. Learning is sequence of approximations, some of them quite far from the intended mark, and it is not unusual for a student to sound worse before he sounds better. (194)

If we do not allow students the space in which "to sound worse"

before they sound "better," we pressure them to import their language from less vulnerable sources. Joseph Williams and Rosemary Hake have documented that many teachers actually prefer obfuscation to clarity. If we reward best those who sound like the professionals, perhaps we have only ourselves to blame when they minimally digest articles in the learned journals and feed them back to us, with or without adequate documentation.

For 1983-84 I taught writing in Beijing to 150 senior English majors. To graduate, each had to write an extensive senior thesis, supervised by a senior faculty member in the final semester. For this project they could either translate an important essay and write a brief introduction, or they could write an original piece of literary analysis. In the first semester I tried to prod the students into an early draft of these projects, with elaborate explanations of how to use secondary materials to augment but not replace one's own authority. They stared at me with glazed eyes, convinced that they knew how to write a long paper and did not need me. More than 140 plagiarized extensively.

I responded with an open letter to the class and to their tutors, in which I specified "The major problem: most of you make no attempt to distinguish between your own authority and that of your sources. Many of you do not document your sources at all...." I explained documentation and stressed:

> The Institute does not expect you to originate data or analysis, but it does expect you to digest and compare the analyses of others. Of course you need to borrow ideas, in part

to demonstrate that you recognize and credit good ones. Just as importantly, you need to show off your own contribution, to establish your own more limited authority. Make it important for us to read your paper.

I noted that they could gain much of their authority as a juggler, but that jugglers do not impress until they manage at least three items.

I urge you not to pretend to more authority than you actually have. Follow the universally accepted rules of evidence. You don't want to read a book by someone who claims great wisdom, only then to discover that the person had paraphrased that "wisdom" out of a better book without even telling you.

In the spring I advised only three of the 150, and one of these changed advisors when I persevered to insist that she document properly and develop her own ideas. With another, who wrote about the grotesque in Carson McCullers, I feared I pressed almost too hard, especially after the second time she broke down in tears:

Your outline only reviews prefabricated approaches to the novel: in it you do not address my essential criticism, namely that you have not yet established any grounds for your own authority. You need to make the grounds crucial even to the way that you organize your paper.

For example, in parts 1 and 2 you propose to speak at length about not only McCullers but all other Southern writers; yet in no way could you know enough to do so on your own. Import material for a paragraph here and there, but do not let it take over major chunks of your paper.

> I insist that you find a way to get back into the primary material, namely McCullers' own work, and to collect fresh data from it to support a thesis of your own or a thesis which you borrow. Your outline should organize this new data or should chart the kind of search you propose as a way to find the new data.
>
> At the moment you still prepare to do little more than sophisticated copy exercises....

She and my other advisee finally yielded to my pressure and wrote splendid papers. The Institute hired both of them as teachers in the following year, one of the best rewards the leaders there have to give out. I wish all other stories could have so happy a conclusion.

I view plagiarism more as a professional issue than a moral one. The new MLA Handbook cogently demonstrates ways writers can borrow to reinforce their own authority or as well as ways the writers can borrow to usurp the authority of others (19-23). The distinctions are crucial to the integrity of our scholarly enterprises.

But the problem goes deeper. Imported authority unimpeachably documented can still undermine a writer's authority, especially when the writer treats it too deferentially. Note the opening of a teacher's first version of his paper written for my graduate class in Beijing:

> When I paid a visit to the teacher at his apartment on the campus on a Saturday afternoon, I happened to find a pamphlet, entitled Profile of the Freshman Class, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, 1981-1982. The curiosity piqued by the title made

me start skimming it, though I did not expect to find anything extraordinarily interesting. But something in the pamphlet did arouse my interest, and I got an idea. Why can't I use the same method to make an investigation on the Chinese freshmen whom my colleagues and I are teaching now? I did it, 91 students responded to the test, and the result really surprised me.

After conscientiously comparing the data in that pamphlet, which, written by Robert E. Mosier, not only provided the data about the students in the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, UW/SP, but also includes the data on a general survey of the undergraduate student in America as a whole, with that of the Chinese students, I almost confidently reach a conclusion that American students, and Chinese students as well, are plunging in a period of, so called, "individual ascendancy", a term coined by Arthur Levine in his When Dreams and Heroes Died (Washington, Jossey-Bass Pub., 1980)....

What has the writer discovered? Why should we read him and not Levine, Mosier, & Co.? Why does he bury us with the details of his difficulties as a writer? Does he presume to establish his authority by convincing us that he has worked hard in the face of some heavy scholarly models?

Note how much more forcefully, authoritatively, the same writer begins after I raised these objections. He moves quickly to the guts of the discussion:

"I want to train for my occupation. Don't waste your time or mine teaching me easy things like 'how to get along' or 'how to be

well-rounded.' Those are not the essential business of higher education. I want a detailed grasp of my special field so that I can compete!"

Who is speaking? A contemporary American college student? Well, yes. But also a contemporary college student in China's capital.

In the past decade both America and China have shifted priorities from broad communal struggles towards narrower, individualist goals. Both societies have emerged from a period of sustained national strife--in America, the struggles over the Vietnam War; in China, the disastrous "civil war" better known as The Cultural Revolution.

Recently I replicated on my campus in Beijing Robert Mosier's research for his Profile of the Freshman Class, University of Wisconsin/Stevens Point, 1981-82. I documented that students living half-way round the world under radically different economies and ideologies still strikingly resemble one another.

Indeed, both Chinese and American students seem to have turned from blazing idealistic and political passions to both corporate and individual pragmatism. China's government policy now heartily espouses "The Four Modernizations" (Agriculture, Technology, ...?), and Chinese students, like other citizens, welcome the return to a more peaceful life with the promise of increased prosperity for those who work hard....

In the revision, imported experts don't drown out the writer. He cuts the Levine jargon altogether and properly credits Mosier. Now he

writes like a colleague, not like a flunkey.

Teachers have our own problems with authority. My mentor James B. McMillan seized the moment fifteen years ago as we left the room after I had defended my dissertation:

> Until now you have succeeded as a writer primarily by convincing your teachers that you know much of what other people know. Hereafter, editors and readers will assume that. If you expect to command their attention, you will have to say something new.

Teachers need vigilantly to prompt such mini-epiphanies.

Works Cited

Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980

Geertz, Clifford. "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding." Chapter 5 in Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology. New York: Basic Books, 1983. 55-70.

Gibaldi, Joseph, and Walter S. Achtert. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. 2nd Edition, New York: The Modern Language Association, 1984.

Hall, Donald. Writing Well. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973.

Hashimoto, I. "Persuasion as Ethical Argument." Rhetoric Review 4.1 (1985): 46-53.

The Jerusalem Bible. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966.

Levine, Arthur. When Dreams and Heroes Died. Washington: Jossey-Bass Pub., 1980.

Mallonee, Barbara C., and John R. Breihan. "Responding to Students' Drafts: Interdisciplinary Consensus." College Composition and Communication 36.2 (1985): 213-231.

Mosier, Robert E. Profile of the Freshman Class, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, 1981-1982. Stevens Point, Wisconsin: UWSP, 1982.

Searle, J. R. Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language.

Cambridge University Press, 1969.

Shaughnessy, Mina. Errors and Expectations. New York, Oxford University Press, 1977.

Williams, Joseph M., and Rosemary L. Hake. "Phenomenology of Error." College Composition and Communication 32:2 (1981): 152-168.